

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BLOGGERS ROUNDTABLE WITH CAPTAIN JOSEPH HEDGES, ASSISTANT CHIEF OF STAFF ENGINEERING DIRECTORATE, MNSTC-I VIA TELECONFERENCE FROM IRAQ
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CHARLES "JACK" HOLT (chief, New Media Operations, OASD PA): Well, all right. Well, we had several folks that have said they were going to be here today, but I'm not sure where they are. So I suppose we could go ahead and get started and pick them up as they come in.

And let's see here. So let's -- Captain Hedges, are you with us on-line here?

CAPT. HEDGES: Yeah, we're here. Haven't fallen asleep on you yet.

MR. HOLT: (Laughs.) All right, thank you, sir.

Captain Joseph Hedges, assistant chief of staff for -- CAPT. HEDGES: Just call me Joe, please.

MR. HOLT: Okay, will do, Joe. Thank you very much.

Assistant chief of staff for the Engineering Directorate, Multinational Security Transition Command-Iraq, with us for the bloggers round table this morning.

And sir, do you have an opening statement?

CAPT. HEDGES: Sure.

First of all, thank you for the privilege of being on your program as one of many, as they say. Since I'm in the Navy, it isn't I'm a Navy of one; it's a Navy of many. It's a great honor to be here and to be able to share some of the great work that both the coalition and the Iraqi -- (audio break).

I am the engineer -- or as they say in Arabic, the mohandis -- for the Multinational Security Transition Command-Iraq. My job is to be program manager and to oversee a \$1.5 billion construction program throughout all of Iraq in support of the Ministry of Interior and the Ministry of Defense. Very privileged to have this job; it's a huge job. And also, it's a great privilege to be able to work with so many different people, both coalition and Iraqi.

So with that -- and it kind of leads us into our subject today, and that is foreign military sales with regard to construction. (Audio break) --

that we're pursuing right now in which we take the Iraqi money and apply it through our acquisition processes and our oversight processes to be able to build and deliver new facilities in support of the Ministry of Interior and the Ministry of Defense.

So kind of opening remarks. I can even go into more specific detail if you'd like me to. I can tell you right now that currently we're pursuing \$300 million on 12 different sites, building a whole host of facilities in support of the Ministry of Defense, the army -- everything from bases to new barracks, schools for their military, air fields, and just letting it grow.

We also have one site that we're even building a hospital for. So, great stuff. It's also great to see that the Iraqis are starting to participate in this program. We're using this as a catalyst to be able to help them start their acquisition process, their engineering programs, as they step towards self-reliance.

So again, I'd love to answer your questions. I'd love to talk to you about this or any other subject you'd like to talk about.

MR. HOLT: All right, thank you very much. David Axe, you were first online, so why don't you get us started here.

Q Am I still the only person online?

MR. HOLT: I think somebody else has joined us. Who's with us?

Q (Inaudible.)

MR. HOLT: Okay, Jarred, thank you much.

Q Okay. Well, fine. Great. This is David Axe with the Aviation Week Group and also writing for Wired. Sir, thanks for taking the time to speak to us this morning. Appreciate it.

I know there've been complaints in the past that as U.S. forces have turned facilities over to the Iraqi military and then followed up on those facilities, you know, weeks or months down the line, been some complaint that the Iraqis have ruined them.

Is there concern that these facilities are -- that new facilities are not being properly maintained? And if so, does that shape the way that these things are acquired? I mean, are they acquired to a different standard than, say, U.S. forces would demand?

CAPT. HEDGES: Let me start out with -- kind of a multiple-layer question there. Let me start at the top.

My concept of FMS, foreign military sales, is going to enhance the Iraqis wanting to take care of their own facilities -- and I stress "their own." The concept of ownership. Since we're using Iraqi funds to build Iraqi facilities, I think you have a stronger emphasis from the Iraqi chain of command with regards to facilities maintenance and facilities support. So I'm excited. I think that this is a big step in the right direction. Also, even with facilities that we're building with coalition funds, now you're seeing new emphasis within MOD, that they're starting to understand the longevity of these facilities, and starting to equate understand the longevity of these facilities

and starting to equate it's better to take care of them initially than to allow them to rapidly deteriorate, then have to come in and do a multimillion-dollar restoration project.

So gradually learning with each other, gradually helping each other, and with regard to facility maintenance, stepping in the right direction.

The other question that you had -- let's see, there was that part and -
- what's the second part of that? How do you acquire --

(Cross talk.)

Q (Inaudible) -- result.

CAPT. HEDGES: Oh, yes. Yeah, that's real exciting. I'm a little vague in this one. It's interesting. When we -- we've learned some very hard lessons here, and that is in the definition of quality. My definition of quality is to build an enduring facility, a facility that is easy maintainable and also respects the Iraqi culture. It's -- we've learned some hard lessons.

An example would be is in barracks, where we've put in nice pedestal sinks, and then we've come back in two or three weeks to find these beautiful pedestal sinks ripped off the wall. It wasn't done intentionally. In the Iraqi culture, there's a necessity to both wash your hands and your feet. Since we did not accommodate feet washing, the Iraqis "can-do'ed" on us, crawled in the sink, which the sinks were not made to support their weight, and literally ripped them off the wall. So we've learned, we've adjusted. And now if you go into our new latrine facilities, you will see that there is feet-washing stations as to accommodate the Iraqi culture.

Does that answer your question?

Q Yeah, that does. That helps. Who does the work? I understand this is sort of -- it's Iraqi money, and you're involved in the process of spending that money, but who does the actual labor?

CAPT. HEDGES: The labor is done -- we award contracts to, in this case, predominantly to U.S. firms. We then go out and subcontract that to Iraqi firms who, in most cases, hire local Iraqis. So what you see is a trickle-down effect with regards to prosperity.

And in very short order, if you come into some of these areas -- and the way that I measure it is, such as in a remote area -- if you come into the markets initially and as we drive through the market, you will see very few goods at the markets, mostly sustenance-type goods. As our projects take off, and these projects usually go -- our bigger projects will go for a year plus, you will see. Come back in six months and you will see a transformation of the markets. You will see a different even group here. You'll see more women, more children in the markets, a safer place, and then you'll start seeing a little bit of luxury goods in the markets. So you see prosperity in their economy, in their society, which is a good sign to me.

MR. HOLT: All right.

Jarred.

Q Yes, sir.

Thank you for your time, sir.

First question, and then I have some follow-ups, is, when we see new schools or new hospitals or any kind of new facility going up with the help of the Corps of Engineers or any U.S. forces and combined Iraqi forces, and I just saw one yesterday, how do we make sure that 20 years from now, people remember that it was the United States taxpayers and the American people that was investing in the future of the Iraqis? I mean, I know the people see us building it now, kind of. But is there anything inside the buildings or any way that the people of America will get credit as far as just the propaganda purposes or anything like that?

CAPT. HEDGES: We don't put plaques on our buildings. But I think and I know that the Iraqi people will remember the American people for generations to come as the people who liberated them from tyranny. And I hope that the buildings that we build, the schools, the new hospitals -- they remember them for -- not for being schools and hospitals, not for being gifts, but for being opportunities to allow them to step towards a new nation, a new sovereign nation. And to me, that's what's important.

So I don't know. I'm not too big on putting a plaque on it. I know as an American citizen, I'm delighted to be able to help the Iraqis as they step towards becoming a sovereign nation.

Q And as a follow-up then, sir, we see -- as I read the article yesterday about the new Baghdad Airport, that there's some Iraqi construction crews who are going through and renovating that and building a new business center there and trying to be able to bring in new business, that they could just be at BIAP instead of having to worry about the security concerns of the rest of the city.

Is there any thought to creating -- kind of like in the United States in the '30s -- a Civil Conservation Corps, something like that, where you would start bringing in Shi'a and Sunni and Kurdish workers who are unemployed, semi-skilled, and then sending them off in teams to work on these different infrastructure projects throughout the country?

CAPT. HEDGES: I'm not aware of any of that. I think kind of out of -- as the Army would say, kind of out of my lane with regards to have the visibility towards that.

I know there's a lot of great firms here. USAID -- I think it's more in their lane. And I know they've been pursuing a lot of Iraqi firsts in trying to help the Iraqis stand up on their own.

I wish I could give you more detail, but again, I don't have a lot of visibility to that.

MR. HOLT: All right, sir. Thank you very much.

And I kind of have a question that's a little bit -- kind of adjacent to that, in that -- is there a program for training -- say, training in the skilled trades and crafts that -- for the Iraqi maintenance people?

CAPT. HEDGES: There is. USAID has actually put together a couple programs.

Also, our major firms here -- when we come in, many times we'll set up a training program as we take unskilled construction labor and to make it skilled, so that we're able to use the local labor, (besides ?) bringing in outside labor into a community -- spend a lot of effort, a lot of time to build capacity within the various communities.

MR. HOLT: All right. Thank you very much, sir.

Any follow-up questions?

Q I would have some, I mean, if you have more time.

MR. HOLT: Okay. Sure.

Q Sir, what would you consider, just from your own lane, then, the greatest accomplishment in the last few weeks and which we could try to give some visibility to as we're trying to get out the good-news stories that are going on in Iraq?

CAPT. HEDGES: What's a great news story here? I would say it's the FOB Hope, where you have these very successful, brand-new brigades that -- 2,500-man brigades that's standing up in preparation for the Iraqi army to fill them and to expand in their capacity.

I think that's a huge accomplishment.

If you look at the idea of why we build facilities, it falls underneath the three strings here, and that is manning, equipment and facilities.

What we do -- what I do is program facilities. As the Iraqi army grows and takes over a new piece of their country, allowing them to become sovereign, then I've created a home for that army.

Right now, currently, a huge accomplishment. We're working hand in hand with the other coalition partners to expand the Iraqi police force. What our goal is, is to put in 30 new police stations in Baghdad -- a huge accomplishment when you think that -- what a police station represents to a neighborhood. They represent to me a civil authority - (inaudible) -- facility within that neighborhood.

And again, the question -- a tough question to ask: What is the plaque that we leave behind? Maybe not a plaque on a building, but maybe it's that building itself. People go past that police station and know that their community is safer and more secure now as a result of it. Maybe that's what they'll remember America for.

MR. HOLT: All right, sir. And in the -- in previous roundtables, we've heard some of the commanders talking about the surge of recruits joining the Iraqi National Police or Iraqi police and the army. Have you been able to streamline the process to be able to get these facilities that they're going to be needing built quicker?

CAPT. HEDGES: Absolutely. You know, the commanding general -- he's always (pinging ?) on me, you know, "More faster, Joe. More faster." It's kind the old "Star Trek." You know, "Scotty, we need more power here."

We have streamlined it. And what we're looking at is new technology to help Iraq -- and again, by using new technology, it's something that you can give to the Iraqis that will help their construction programs, to try to help and expedite their construction programs.

We're using the concept of also -- of temporary basing to put the Iraqi army and temporary police stations, even -- to give them a foothold in these communities, to allow them to stabilize an area, then to come back -- when the area's a little bit more stable, to come back and put a permanent station in.

Q Jack, can I jump in with him, follow up?

MR. HOLT: Sure, yeah. Yeah.

Q So if I'm understanding correct -- this is David Axe, again, by the way, sorry. If I'm understanding correctly, you are serving as a sort of agent for -- like a contracting agent for spending Iraqi funds, and the work is being done by Iraqis and the money is Iraq. You're just a way of sort of turning that money into actual contracts, which strikes me as -- you know, it's a story we hear across Iraq, is this inability to execute a budget and to oversee contracts. Are you, are you while performing this function also preparing training up Iraqis to take over that function?

CAPT. HEDGES: Absolutely. One of the biggest accomplishments, at least I think that we have in my little small little group, is MOUs, MOAs or partnerships with -- Memorandums of Understanding, Memorandums of Agreement -- with the department -- or the Ministry of Defense as to -- not to do this for them, but to help them to start doing it themselves; having joined working groups for project oversight and project management; bringing them on the site with regard to their engineers to facilitate ideas of a quality control, quality assurance; incorporating their ideas into standardized design. You know, the things that we talk about -- cultural -- instead of us just saying here is the gift, now what do you want, how can we make this facility better for you with regards to functionality, better for you for maintenance; what are those things that we can do as a team, as a partnership to move forward.

Q So are you seeing that these partners are getting better, are getting close to being able to take over this function?

CAPT. HEDGES: Oh, absolutely. You know, as we step through the transition process, to me, every day you see the Iraqis become a little bit -- I like to use the word stronger or better. They become more organized, more efficient. They're building capacity in their ministries, becoming better organized, and it just takes time, and they're using their time wisely. Eventually, to me, they'll be self-sufficient.

Q Okay. Thank you.

MR. HOLT: All right.

CAPT. HEDGES: And truthfully, sir, a lot of the problems of bureaucracy, we suffer a lot of those problems, too. There's just a little bit more visibility, I think, in the government of Iraq.

MR. HOLT: That's understandable too.

Thank you, sir, very much.

We're running short of time here. Any other follow-up questions? (No response.) All right, sir.

Captain Joseph -- Joe Hedges, thank you very much for being with us. Hopefully, we can speak again here in the future, kind of keep track of how things are going with you and the progress you're making in Iraq. Thank you, sir, very much.

CAPT. HEDGES: If you ever want to go out and see some job sites with me, just let me know, I'll be happy to take you out on a tour.

Q Thanks.

MR. HOLT: Thank you, sir.

CAPT. HEDGES: All right. See you guys. Thank you.

END.